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Newsroom: Yeluri '07 on Baltimore Protests

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Yeluri '07 on Baltimore Protests

A public interest lawyer in inner-city Baltimore, Swapna Yeluri '07 was at ground zero of the recent protests -- and says both police and community have much work to do.

From the PROVIDENCE JOURNAL: "[OP-ED: We Are All Affected by City's Problems](#)" by Swapna Yeluri

'07



May 5, 2015: The events and destruction in Baltimore over the past

week triggered a lot of difficult emotions within me. I am an attorney in the city, advocating for underprivileged youths and veterans. Last October I was attacked in the same inner-city neighborhood where I work, day in and day out, trying to help the community. I contacted the police and received no assistance at all. The experience left me angry and bitter – not just toward the police, but also toward the individuals in the community. Coming to terms with that incident and my reactions to it has been one of the greatest internal struggles I've ever faced.

There is a lot of anger in this community. In my opinion, a large part of this anger results from feeling targeted and attacked by law enforcement; but it is also about having to deal with generational, systemic issues (of poverty, unemployment, education, housing, abuse, crime and drug addiction) that destabilize the community and family structure. And while this anger is understandable, neither the destruction of human life by law enforcement, nor the destruction of communities by their own citizens, is acceptable.

However, neither violence nor non-violence has addressed any of the root issues plaguing our neighborhoods. If they had, we would not be dealing with the same problems over and over again. Leadership within law enforcement must take greater responsibility for officers' behavior. Officers need more training on implicit bias, based on both racial and socioeconomic status – and one or two sessions aren't enough; the training must be continuous and ongoing. Therapy services for post-traumatic

stress disorder should be available (and perhaps even mandatory) to help officers better cope with situations they face on a regular basis.

What the community needs most are task forces to address the root causes of these violent incidents. There are many issues that need to be addressed – lack of employment readiness, appropriate education systems and mentorship opportunities, to name just a few. Many step forward to offer their opinions on the conditions and situations of our neighborhoods whenever a high-profile incident occurs, but once the news cameras go away, few stay around to help in any significant or continuous way. Assistance in addressing these issues is needed all year 'round.

I've worked with and mentored youth in Baltimore neighborhoods, and the issues they are facing can't be fixed by merely donating or volunteering to help clean up for a few days after a tragic event. We need people who are continuously engaged and available to youths – to help them work through their anger (over *all* the issues in their life), and to educate them about solutions and opportunities that they are probably not aware of. Some of these youths lack the information and family support that would otherwise guide them to services that can assist. Mentoring programs can also help fill this gap.

I am not African-American. I am not currently in a lower socio-economic bracket. I am not a police officer. I am not in any of those shoes. But I am human. And African-Americans are human. The poor are human. Police are human. We are all human; we are all affected by these problems; and, as humans, we should all be working to solve them. If we do not, we will continue to be confronted with situations like those of the past week. Ignoring the problem is no longer an option.